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Direct cremation and the privatisation of funerals in the UK

Between 2017-2020 we conducted a study into cremation funeral choices and grief.

We found that choosing not to have a funeral service at the time of the cremation did not result in a different grief experience to those that had a funeral service.

There were three driving factors for people opting not to have a funeral service at the time of the cremation: compromise, control and consistency.

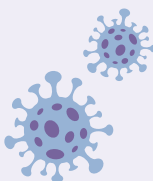
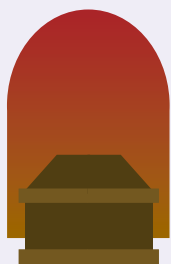


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What is direct cremation?

- Direct cremation is when a cremation takes place without a funeral service on the same day.
- A commemorative event may take place at another time, with or without the ashes.
- Direct cremation separates the cremation from the memorial of the person who died.
- Introduced in the UK in 2012, rates of direct cremation in the UK are rising.
- Before the COVID-19 pandemic direct cremation accounted for between 3-6% of all cremation funerals.
- During 2020, when funeral attendance was severely limited due to pandemic lockdown restrictions, 14% of all deaths resulted in a direct cremation¹. This equates to about 100,000 people.



“ I didn’t want a lot of strangers coming to a funeral who I had to be nice to, but I didn’t know from other parts of his life. I’d never seen them when he was ill. ”
(Gaynor)



Why do people choose direct cremation?

Our study took place between 2017 and 2020, before the COVID-19 pandemic. We found that cost was not the main driving factor and that people chose direct cremation for three reasons:

Compromise: because they were unable to have the funeral that they or the deceased person wanted.

Control: because they wanted to organise a commemorative service at another time and determine who could attend. There could be more than one event.

Consistency: because not having a funeral at the time of the cremation was consistent with their values and beliefs.



¹ Sunlife, 2021

What does this tell us?

- Not everyone wants a funeral service.
- Direct cremation indicates a declining need for social support from public, in-person commemorative events on the same day as the body's cremation.
- The take up of direct cremation mirrors changes to weddings over the last 40 years, and indicates a desire to control who can attend.



- There is value in having events, sometimes more than one, that extend beyond the day of the body's cremation.
- It is no longer possible to assume that everyone wants or needs a funeral service on the day of the cremation.

Why are funerals changing?

- After a death people are getting their social support from other places, rather than from the funeral service on the day of the cremation.
- There is a growing acceptance that there are other opportunities to commemorate and come together at another time and place, or online. For example holding a memorial service on a 1 year anniversary of a death.



- We are seeing a move away from funerals on the day of the cremation as a public event open to anyone.
- In other words, funerals are becoming privatised. Some are taking place behind closed doors and are invite only.



“ ... We didn't want a service at a crematorium which will be full of people who, over the 20 years that she was ill, never ever came to see her or ask how she was. ”
(Kenneth)



- Cultural expectations for a public and open event to mark a death, bringing a wide and disconnected network of people together may no longer be required.

What does this mean for the future?

- We need to know more about what is gained and what is lost by not having a funeral service on the same day of the cremation. We need to learn more about the organisation of alternative commemorative events at different times and different places.
- There is a lot of potential for creative remembrance that meaningfully reflects the personality and individuality of the person who died and the bereaved.



“To me, it was a no-brainer, not to have a funeral service. I couldn’t think of anything more drab, and, certainly, it would not be respectful to her or reflect her being at all.”
(Nathan)



“... My memories of the time we had together are more important to me than a disposal of remains. I have, I suppose, quite a pragmatic approach to that, because I firmly and truly believe that this physical life is not all there is.”
(Marie)



The research

This study was an independent academic research project funded by Dignity Funerals between 2017-2020, which used two surveys and interviews with recently bereaved people.

More details about the study can be found in Woodthorpe, K. et al (2021) “My memories of the time we had together are more important”: direct cremation and the privatisation of UK funerals, *Sociology*.

**You can request a copy of the paper by emailing
Dr Kate Woodthorpe at k.v.woodthorpe@bath.ac.uk**

**For further information on the wider project, please visit:
www.bath.ac.uk/projects/the-relationship-between-cremation-and-grief-1-2-years-post-death/**



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